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Problem Set 2

This paper measures how House members' expressed priorities respond to tumultuous changes in institutional and electoral contexts. To measure the expressed priorities, the researcher uses a large collection of every House press releases (nearly 170,000) from 2005 to 2010.

To interpret the data, the researcher first mention that there is increasing evidence that press releases are a reliable and useful source for capturing how legislators communicate with their constituents. He references to Grimmer (2013), who shows that press releases contain politically relevant content not found in floor speeches and that press releases have a direct effect over the content of newspaper stories and constituent evaluations. The method he uses built on models from many other papers. For example, this paper contributes to a growing literature that examines legislative speech using automated methods for text (Hillard, Purpura and Wilkerson, 2008; Monroe, Colaresi and Quinn, 2008; Quinn et al., 2010; Grimmer, 2013; Cormack, 2014). When using text as data method, he also references to another paper that provided a guide to automated text analysis. The researcher also replicates a research done by Justin Grimmer, Sean J. Westwood and Solomon Messing, who showed how legislators create an impression of influence through credit claiming messages. In order to show the estimated number of credit claiming press releases, he used the estimates from Grimmer, Westwood and Messing (2014), who used a team of well trained coders to hand code 800 press releases as credit claiming or not. Furthermore, when examining whether expected variation in legislators' behavior manifests in our measures, his expectation is from a theory by Adler and Lapinski who said that legislators will discuss prominent industries in their district more often (Adler and Lapinski, 1997). After he finds out from the quantitative comparisons of Republican and Democratic language when discussing the stimulus that Republicans use words like spend, govern, democrat, taxpayer, and trillion at a much higher rate than Democrats, who use words like budget, cut, and education more often than Republicans, which can show an increase in Republican criticism of the president,

he also references to Eric Cantor, who criticized a budget proposal because “ The President’s budget spends more than any other in history, creates the largest deficits in history, and imposes the largest tax increases in history - at a time when our country can least afford it” (Cantor, 2010).

On the one hand, the paper is a descriptive study where the majority of the paper is seeking to break up the press releases into a topic model. In addition, he provides many descriptive statistics of the data. This paper is also an identification exercise. It applies a set of related models to the dataset and shows how representation changes in response to shifts in electoral pressure and changes in party control of Congress.

Computational tools make possible studying how legislators directly engage their constituents and how this engagement matters for representation. Before applying statistical models to the collection of press releases, the researcher first preprocesses the texts. And then he uses a statistical topic model that estimates granular and coarse topics, along with legislators’ attention to those topics. Traditional hand coding is simply unable to keep pace with the staggering amount of text that members of Congress produce each year. Using the measures from the model, the researcher is able to show that “Republican House members abandon credit claiming after Obama’s election, while Democratic House members amplify their credit claiming. In place of claiming credit for money, Republican House members criticize the Affordable Care Act, stimulus expenditures, and more generally the Obama administration.” He also shows that even though there is a shift in rhetoric after the 2008 elections, legislators’ attention to the coarse topics are broadly stable over time.

Here are two suggestions I would give to the researcher:

First of all I would suggest him to use a broader data set. In this paper, the majority of his data is from before and after Obama’s presidency. I think it would add more complexity to his research if he could include more data from during Obama’s presidency.

Secondly, the topic modeling method he used is under scrutinized. The majority of his work is to use this modeling and evaluate topic changes. However, its accuracy of identifying specific proportions of topics has not been validated. With that being said, I

would suggest him to provide more evidence in justifying the validity of his method.